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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/R/MR:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, AZAIBACK, AND
AFERNANDEZ, IIP/G/NEA-SA MDAVIDSON
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SUBJECT: Syria/Russia, Brammertz Report, Palestinian Territories,
Iraq (12/20)

¶1. Summary: On Dec. 20 Syrian papers focused on President Asad's Dec. 19 visit to Russia and his meeting with President Putin. Headlines featured this portion of Asad's statement in a news conference after meeting President Vladimir Putin. "We want to have a dialogue but you have to differentiate between dialogue and giving instructions. We are open for dialogue but we will not take instructions." Asad also said he is always ready for talks with the US provided that there is a suitable topic. "Any dialogue," he said, "is useful as long as you are discussing joint interests, not only others' interests and forget yours." President Asad denied Israeli media reports that Syria had sent secret proposals to Israel proposing talks on the disputed Golan Heights and offering help on releasing an Israeli soldier captured by Hamas. "There is no such proposal -- nothing," he said. He said that Syria wants peace but the Israeli government is not capable of achieving such peace.

Papers also reported that on Dec. 19 the UN Security Council listened to a statement from Serge Brammertz, chairman of the international investigation commission into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, on his recent report, in which he stressed Syria's cooperation with the investigation. Bashar al-Ja'fari, Syria's representative to the United Nations, stressed to the Council that Syria continues to cooperate with the commission and provide it with any information that becomes available to it on this issue. He said that Brammertz' report clearly shows that Syria's cooperation was satisfactory and on time. He added that Syria is committed to continuing its cooperation with a professional and neutral investigation out of its full eagerness to reveal the truth. At the same time, he warned against the exploitation of the investigation by some parties in our region and beyond to serve political purposes.

Syrian commentators on Dec. 20 warned Palestinians that their clashes serve only their Israeli enemy. They criticized the foreign parties that support one Palestinian group against another and the local parties that count on this foreign support.

End of summary.

¶2. Selected Headlines:

"The Syrian-Russian summit: a success reflecting developed relations. Presidents Asad and Putin hold fruitful and constructive talks focusing on bilateral relations and regional issues. President Asad: Russia enjoys an important position and plays an effective role in the world and the region" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/20)

"President Asad: We are open for dialogue but we will not take instructions. We want to achieve peace, but the appropriate conditions are still unavailable.
President Putin: Syria's role is important" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 12/20)

"Foreign Minister al-Mouallem to the Washington Post: Peace, stability and prosperity are Syria's main goals... Attempts to isolate Syria have failed and the American administration must adopt a new method based on dialogue. Restoring occupied Golan is a priority for Syrian policy... We support stability in Lebanon and Iraq, but we do not do bargains" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/20)

"Syria's Representative to the UN Security Council: The Brammertz Report indicates Syria's cooperation in exposing the truth on the Al-Hariri assassination" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/20)

"In a new defiance of international legitimacy, Israel accelerates settlement activities in the Golan" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/20)

"AL Secretary General Mossa returns to Beirut. Al-Saniora government reiterates rejection of early elections" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 12/20)

" Hamas and Fatah agree on ceasefire and withdrawing militiamen from the street. Hanieh: There is a US decision to topple the Palestinian government" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/20)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"A Tour in Extraordinary Circumstances"

An unsigned editorial in government-owned Al-Ba'th, said (12/20):
"President Al-Asad's current tour of some Arab countries and Russia enjoys a great importance....

"Syria is a main player in the region and it has its opinion, position, and vision toward every issue and file. But above all, it has occupied territory and it adheres to the restoration of every inch of it. This is a fact that the Europeans and the Americans know. Syria's position will not change despite all the pressure and attempts to isolate Syria that were practiced in the past two years. These facts and situations explain the importance of the talks that President Asad will hold with Russian President Vladimir Putin in light of the US Administration's crisis in Iraq and its determination to continue interfering in the affairs of the region and the world."

"Strategic Failure and the Policy of Pressure on Syria"

Fayiz Izz-al-Din, a political analyst in government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (12/20): "President Bush is applying pressure on Syria instead of discussing his and his army's predicament in Iraq....

"Syria is under pressure because it defends Arab rights and adopts an independent foreign policy whereby it rejects foreign dictates.... The political and geo-strategic crisis of the current US Administration might lead to the launching of new aggressions against other countries, including Syria, in an attempt to come out of this crisis....

"Bush's demands that Syria release political detainees and stop its efforts to destabilize the region are flagrant interference in Syria's domestic affairs.... They reflect an imperial tendency that refuses to admit failure and that gambles with the future of humanity to serve its illegitimate and inhuman purposes...."

"Who Is the Beneficiary?"

Umar Jaftali, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, said (12/20): "The inter-Palestinian clashes represent a gift to Israel, which dreams of dragging the Palestinians into a civil war on behalf of its army, which was exhausted in the aggression on Lebanon, and its government, which was worn out politically and economically as a result of that aggression...."

"It is true that a cease-fire was arranged yesterday, but it is also true that tension remains between the presidency and the government. Some parties are adding fuel to the fire by taking the side of this party or that, as Tony Blair did yesterday, and as the American and EU reactions showed when they imposed a collective punishment on the Palestinian people for their democratic option and election of their government. This deluded some Palestinians into thinking that only the removal of this government would end the siege, the collective punishment, and the Israeli practices and allow the resumption of the settlement process...."

"There is an American-Israeli conspiracy against the Palestinian people.... We regret that some Palestinian parties dealt with this plan in good faith in the hope they would overcome the difficult situation.... There is a need to contain Palestinian differences

and activate all efforts on the basis of national priorities."

"Where Is the Way Out?"

Ghazi al-Dada, a commentator in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (12/20): "President Bush is not listening to the growing voices that call on him to change his Iraq policy...."

"Bush knows that he is up to his ears in the Iraqi quagmire, but he denies it out of stubbornness, nothing else. He is looking for a face-saving way out of this quagmire, into which his confused and stupid policies pushed him. He can find this exit in the Baker-Hamilton recommendations, but it seems the shackles that tie his hands -- and most of them are Zionist -- are too powerful to enable him to free himself and implement the recommendations...."

Roebuck